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Professional Materials

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Professional Materials

Unequal Opportunity: Learning to Read in the U.S.A.
Written by Jill Sunday Bartoli. Teachers College Press,
Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027.
1995. ISBN: 0-8077-3384-9. 226 pp. US\$19.95.

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In *Unequal Opportunity: Learning to Read in the U.S.A.*, Jill Bartoli sounds a loud and passionate alarm. She asserts that the United States' public education system is an institution in crisis, that traditional forms of reading instruction are characterized by decontextualization and developmental inappropriateness, and that American schools are places that have traditionally facilitated the systematic disenfranchisement of significant portions of the nation's population. Bartoli strengthens her position by drawing on two case studies. In the first, she presents a ten year history of James, an African-American male in the midst of a predominantly white school system. Bartoli's data reveals an ongoing progression of tracking, labeling, and learned alienation that begins in the primary grades and culminates in James' dropping out of high school. James believes that the school system has abandoned him and so, finally, he abandons the system. In the second case study, the author describes a year long staff development project conducted at an inner-city elementary school. Bartoli's data indicates a sharp incongruity between the perceptions of school personnel and the families of

students within the system. A disturbing cycle is revealed in which disproportionate numbers of children from minority and low socioeconomic backgrounds first experience failure in literacy and learning, and then find that their families are blamed for this failure, by school personnel. In her detailing of both studies, Bartoli shows the devastating ramifications that often occur when there is a cultural mismatch between schools and families.

Bartoli does more than simply outline the many problems that plague American literacy instruction. Rather, she guides readers toward a better understanding of the nature and scope of these problems by grounding them within a broader ecology, one in which learning to read is viewed as part of the larger context of school, family, and society; in which students are understood, first, as unique human beings who are influenced by a range of historical, cultural, and economic factors; and in which the problems of literacy education are viewed as inseparable parts of the larger problems that come with living in a complex society such as our own. At the heart of Bartoli's argument is the concern that life and literacy learning have both become stratified ventures in the United States, and that the principles of democracy, freedom, and equality, cherished by our citizenry and espoused by our school systems, are in reality, more available to some members of our society than to others. She describes an 'ecology of inequity' that permeates reading instruction. A narrow, positivist-based theory of reading achievement has dominated the field, resulting first in the testing, sorting, and labeling of students, and ultimately in the creation of a caste system, in which those who are labeled generally find themselves relegated to a school literacy experience hallmarked by low expectations, special placements, repeated failures, and the implicit message that they are not worthy of membership in the learning community.

Bartoli's work provides a strong critique of many of the assumptions that have undergirded the theory and practice of reading instruction. To her credit, the author clearly states that there are no easy solutions to the complex problems that characterize our field; no "quick-fixes" for current social dilemmas that have long sociohistorical roots. However, Bartoli does not leave readers without a sense of hope. She believes that change is possible, and invites teachers, administrators, parents, and researchers to work collaboratively towards this end. The book includes broad recommendations for facilitating change, as well as detailed descriptions of two models for reforming schools. The first model focuses on change within the parameters of a school building. The second presents a more inclusive example of change within a community model.

Unequal Opportunity: Learning to Read in the U.S.A. is a provocative text that is both relevant and timely. Grounded in theory and with direct applications for practice, this book bids readers to re-envision literacy education and to reconsider the relationships that exist among schools, families, and communities. At once a critique and a call for action, Bartoli's text invites readers to come and participate in the transformational work that is necessary to insure that all children will truly have equal opportunity to learn to read in the U.S.A.

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